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On View: 'Nathaniel Mary Quinn: This is Life'

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“Erica Easton,” by Nathaniel Mary Quinn, black charcoal, soft pastel, oil pastel, gouache on Coventry Vellum paper, 30-by-29-and-a-half inches, 2015. Collection of Kathleen Madden and Paul Frantz, New York and London. Image courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery. © Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Photography by RCH.

An exhibit of unconventional portraits, “Nathaniel Mary Quinn: This is Life,” in the State Street Gallery at Madison Museum of Contemporary Art (MMoCA), 227 State St., is the first solo museum show for the artist. Upon first glance, the portraits appear to be pieced together from newspaper and magazine clippings; however, Quinn renders everything by hand.

The period between 2014 and 2018 proved to be a crucial time in Quinn’s art career. He developed and refined the collage-like technique, seen in the exhibit’s artwork, which is now synonymous with his name.

“Using black charcoal and soft pastel over gouache – with careful interjections of oil paint, paint stick, and oil pastel – he masterfully manipulates his various mediums to create unconventional depictions of individuals from his past,” the MMoCA press release stated. “The artist references disparate sources of imagery – from comic books to Northern Renaissance paintings – to compose each artwork.”

Quinn does not replicate physical likenesses in his portraits, he prefers using complex and ambiguous renderings of appearance. Through the abstract compositions, he explores the psychological dimensions of identity and the resiliency of human nature.

“We are all beautiful and grotesque, we are all broken in some way, and in the midst of being broken we find ways to embrace our brokenness and carry on life,” Quinn said in the press release.

“But we are all like this. Happiness, grief, joy ... this is life.”

Born in Chicago, Quinn grew up in the housing projects on the city’s south side. A talented student, he won a scholarship to a boarding school in Indiana when he was 15. Soon after starting at the school, his mother passed away; a month later, he returned home to find his father and brothers had abandoned him.

The individuals in his portraits range from the drug dealers who ran the streets in the housing projects to the teachers who nurtured his artistic growth. Quinn has said his work is about his trying to seek a resolution to his childhood; and a way of recreating his family so they can continue to exist.

“Formally speaking, I wanted to find a way to create a stronger marriage between the grotesque and the seamless, between chaos and organization,” Quinn said.